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Persistence and Change in the Black Forest Ethnic Dress Tradition

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The ethnic dress of German-speaking countries, known as *Trachten*, dates back to the 16th century and traces its roots to the everyday dress of rural classes. Although regional variations exist, for women and girls the basic components of *Trachten* include a blouse, vest, skirt, apron, and hat. Wearing *Trachten* is no longer prevalent in many German locales, yet the tradition has persisted in the Black Forest. This project explored the various factors that have supported the persistence of and change in Trachten traditions in a contemporary society. The research was informed by Joanne Eicher's (1999) theoretical proposition that ethnic dress is not static, but rather changes across space and time in ways that enable its persistence, owing to its capacity to connect individuals and groups to a meaningful heritage. Also relevant was the work of Charles Keyes (1995), who considered how ethnic and national communities are constructed with a compelling genealogy in a cultural form (i.e., dress), but also must be backed by the authority of tradition. Keyes defines the authority of tradition as "the voices of the past" embedded in the present through "customary practices that seem timeless" (p. 137).

For this study, ethnographic data were collected over a seven-week period in the summer of 2013. Primary methods of data collection included in-depth interviews and participant observations with 10 female adult wearers and 2 local Trachten experts, and informal interviews and participant observations at various Trachten events throughout the Black Forest. Analyses revealed two overarching themes illuminating persistence and change in lived practice of the Trachten tradition. These emergent themes are discussed below.

Persistence of Trachten Tradition. The continuation of customary practices surrounding Trachten tradition was linked to formalized practice, meaningful identities, and desires to preserve and promote local culture. Participants' accounts revealed the role of formalized practice in preserving Trachten traditions. For instance, around 1900, leadership of local clubs froze the stylistic characteristics for Trachten in time, creating standards for design and aesthetics that are still revered today. In 1948, the Bund Heimat und Volksleben (BHV) Association was formed to oversee the clubs and to further preserve Trachten culture. To this end, the BHV formalized stylistic characteristics and materials and methods for Trachten use and production as written guidelines. Today, the guidelines regulate Trachten use by dictating who wears Trachten, when they can be worn, how they should look when they are worn, and how they should be produced, thereby serving as "voices of the past" that authoritatively formalize the Trachten tradition, enabling the preservation of Trachten as a cultural form.

Traditionally, Trachten have communicated meaningful social identities including gender, age, marital status, religion, and geographic location. Participants' accounts also revealed the way in which Trachten have come, in a contemporary cultural context, to reflect a connection

to one's *Heimat*, a German concept meaning "home" or "homeland" and symbolizing nostalgia, values, and ethnic and cultural heritage (Blickle, 2002). As a positive force, *Heimat* was used during Germany's unification to create a sense of nationhood. The Nazis transformed *Heimat* to promote Aryan ethnic identity. Owing to its association with the Nazis, some degree of cultural ambivalence toward *Heimat* still lingers in contemporary Germany. For participants, however, Trachten were linked with *Heimat* in uniquely personal and positive ways, such that Trachten became a very intimate and meaningful construction of their German heritage and regional identities. In so much as participants' association of Trachten with *Heimat* had spanned the course of their lives and was one they regarded as important for future generations to appreciate, it contributed to the persistence of the Trachten tradition.

Efforts to champion Trachten exemplify the persistence of the tradition. Participants expressed concern about declining numbers of Trachten wearers and producers and an attendant desire to keep the tradition alive, prompting the HBV and the Trachten clubs to assume an active role in preserving and promoting the Trachten tradition. For instance, the BHV subsidizes the purchase of Trachten for families in need. Producers and the BHV archive examples of handcrafting techniques and retired Trachten pieces so that future generations retain the traditions, and local museums house extensive collections of regional Trachten.

Change in Trachten Tradition. Consistent with Eicher's (1999) propositions about ethnic dress, findings also revealed that change in Trachten traditions is inevitable and facilitates persistence. Whereas the guidelines provide specific prescriptions about how Trachten should be worn and produced, they also acknowledge that change in Trachten tradition is possible and should occur in order for Trachten to remain relevant in society. For instance, the BHV and clubs may approve changes during the production of Trachten as necessary, as long as they do not alter the prescribed aesthetics of the garments. For example, when customary materials for producing Trachten become unavailable, such as glass beads and hand-woven fabrics, local producers work with club leadership to identify approved substitutions.

Finally, findings indicated that wearers and producers did not always comply with the BHV's Trachten guidelines. Wearers sported body piercings as well as modern jewelry and makeup with their Trachten, constituting guideline violations. Whereas participants insisted that Trachten should mirror the styles from 1900, observations proved otherwise. One producer disclosed that modifications to garments were made for clients desiring a more contemporary silhouette, with the caveat that the Trachten appear authentic. In this respect, Trachten are alive, but are mired in tradition. If Trachten producers and wearers can incorporate some modicum of contemporary with traditional, then Trachten will remain relevant. It is through these changes in practice, based on the formalized past, in the mixing of new with old, that Trachten persist.

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